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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003785

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: NRC REPORT - THE LONG VIEW

REF: A. BANGKOK 3368 (NRC REPORT RELEASED)

- 1B. BANGKOK 2338 (WAY AHEAD: TRAINING AND ASSISTANCE)
- 1C. 05 BANGKOK 7573 (BRN-C)
- 1D. 05 BANGKOK 6850 (SLOW PROGRESS OF THE NRC)
- 1E. 05 BANGKOK 4108 (NRC CHAIRMAN ANAND)
- 1F. 05 BANGKOK 3203 (CONSPIRACY THEORIES)

Classified By: CDA Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary/Comment: The final report of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), "Overcoming Violence Through the Power of Reconciliation" was issued on June 5. The report provides solid background on the origins of the conflict and context on how specific local factors are influencing the violence. The report downplays the role of operational separatist groups. Emphasis is placed on law enforcement and educational reform (areas which mesh well with ongoing, or proposed, USG assistance efforts). The authors express concern over "Buddhist flight" and the growing divide between local Buddhist and Muslim populations. U.S. Middle East policy is briefly mentioned as a general influence on the violence and rumors of U.S. involvement are alluded to.

12. (C) Practical near-term recommendations include the re-establishment of the dismantled security structures which had contained the decades old unrest during the 1980-90s. However, the majority of the recommendations take a very long view of the situation, and do not present clear options for policy makers to address immediate security concerns. Despite its "academic" nature, the report attempts to focus the RTG on developing a long-term strategy to deal with the festering situation and thus deserves our continued encouragement. The July visits to Washington of Thai Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart and Foreign Minister Kantathai offer opportunities to reinforce our June 21 statement of support for the NRC and encourage a comprehensive approach to the South. End Summary/Comment

ACKNOWLEDGING PAST FAILURES

13. (C) The National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) report on southern Thailand -- "Overcoming Violence Through the Power of Reconciliation" -- presented to the Thai government on June 5 offers a sweeping view of the decades old violence afflicting southern Thailand, ranging from anecdotal stories of violence to obscure policy recommendations. The report acknowledges recent RTG failures that have exacerbated the situation. In particular, the dissolution of both the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and the 43rd Civilian-Police-Military Command (CMP-43) in 2002 is noted as a key mistake. It argues for a return to previous

policies that emphasized the "peaceful approach" to resolving the conflict. The report acknowledges the involvement of separatist groups and highlights the role of the BRN-C as the most active; however, the report tends to downplay the significance of the individual separatist groups, noting the amorphous nature of their organization (reftel C).

STRUCTURAL FACTORS - LAW ENFORCEMENT, EDUCATION

14. (C) The NRC cites weak law enforcement and lack of the rule of law as primary factors behind the violence.

Ineffective investigations and human rights abuses by security forces have seriously undermined the government's credibility. NRC proposals include enhancing the role of civil society in the justice process, effective monitoring of the implementation of justice, and enhancing the efficiency of the justice process, among others. The report also proposes improving the Islamic legal system in the South by "considering the use of shariah courts," and developing an "alternative justice process." Sunai Phasuk, a respected local analyst for Human Rights Watch, said the NRC was correct to prioritize due process and judicial system reform.

Failure to arrest perpetrators or credibly prosecute militants has destroyed public confidence in the government's ability to provide basic security or justice, he said.

(Note: These recommendations jibe with post proposals to coordinate and re-focus our training and assistance towards increasing law enforcement capabilities in the South (reftel B). End Note) The report repeatedly emphasizes the need to remove "wayward" local bureaucrats. It identifies the need that "the government deal decisively with state officials against whom abuse-of-power complaints are directed" as an "immediate reconciliation measure."

15. (C) Education reform is also repeatedly cited by the

BANGKOK 00003785 002 OF 003

authors as a central factor in addressing the long-term problems in the South. Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn -- who serves as an advisor to senior security officials as well as to the royal family -- said the NRC is correct to take on long-term educational reform. Curriculum reform, especially of the private Islamic "Pondok" schools, will be a key competent of changing the dynamic in the South. Panitan said The Asia Foundation's "Civic Education and Pondok Reform Program" served as a good model on which to base further efforts. (Note: The program is funded through USAID's regional office in Bangkok and will be expanded significantly in FY06. End Note)

BUDDHIST/MUSLIM TENSION AND MILITANT ATTACKS

16. (C) The report highlights deteriorating relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities and confirms that the "minority Buddhist Thai population is declining rapidly."

Sunai Phasuk -- who has been conducting a long-term research project into abuses by both militants and security forces in southern Thailand -- said his research showed "Buddhist flight" to be a reality and that Buddhists who have not abandoned the far south were "arming themselves to the teeth." Sunai was critical of the report for not acknowledging the significance of militant violence aimed at the Buddhism populace and Muslim "collaborators." According to Sunai, the NRC avoided focusing on "Muslim" violence because they did not want to reinforce existing racist beliefs among the larger populace against ethnic Malays. "The NRC needs to at least question the brutal methods of the militants," he said.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE NRC - THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT US...

17. (C) The NRC underscores the internal causes of the conflict -- historical, economic and social. But the report recognizes the international context: "World events, such as the 9/11 attack on the United States, or the U.S. response of invading Afghanistan and Iraq, can also be linked to the

violence because they can be cited in claiming that the Muslim world is under attack by American imperialism in an unjust war." The report also offers "several perspectives" on why the violence has exploded since January 2004 by quoting other reports on the South. One of these, from a "Thaksin Government Special Task Force," makes reference to "the assumption that the violence was spawned by groups of individuals linked to various movements, e.g., separatist movements, transnational terrorist networks, imperialist national strategies seeking to exploit the situation...." The "imperialist" reference is the only time the NRC report alludes to (but does not endorse) widespread conspiracy theories of U.S. involvement behind the violence (reftel F). (Note: Most local observers do not in fact cite U.S. Middle East policy as a prime factor behind local anger. Local grievances are directed almost exclusively against RTG policies and attitudes towards ethnic Malay Muslims rather than the U.S or the West. International tensions appear to be only a small contributing factor in the rising violence in the South. End Note)

ABSTRACT AND ACADEMIC

¶8. (C) Many local observers have given the NRC credit for producing a good "concept paper", but agree that the result is more of an abstract academic document than a practical policy paper. Dr. Panitan said NRC Chairman Anand Panyarachun -- understanding the long-term nature of the problem and the political reality of Prime Minister Thaksin's reluctant support of the NRC -- wanted to create a "timeless" document that would serve as a guide for future government policy (reftel E). Dr. Panitan said he had privately warned NRC Chairman Anand that the report's tone might make the document hard to accept by some in security forces. The proposal for the Thai Army to create an unarmed "peace battalion", for example, was dismissed out of hand by many in the armed forces. Human Rights Watch echoed the same concerns.

¶9. (C) The report tackles the larger question of minority identity in a Thai state: "Defeating the violence ... requires for the most part political measures that aim to rearrange the relationship between the state and the people, as well as between the majority and the minority populations both in the area and throughout the country...." The NRC proposes more rights for local communities to allocate the use of public lands and local natural resources. It recommends establishing Melayu as "an official working

BANGKOK 00003785 003 OF 003

language." No one can argue, in principle, with proposals for better policing or justice, but recommendations that counter long-standing and ingrained Thai ideas about national unity and identity will be far more controversial. (Privy Counselor -- and southerner -- General Prem Tinsulanonda has already publicly come out against the proposal on use of Melayu/Yawi as an 'official' language). Nonetheless, these are issues that need to be considered if the RTG is serious about finding a durable solution to the alienation of the southern Malay-Muslims.

COMMENT: CONTINUED U.S. SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

¶10. (C) The NRC report is more theoretical than practical and specific. Some recommendations (such as re-establishing coordinating bodies like those Thaksin abolished) are eminently sensible; some (promoting employment in Arab counties) are of dubious utility in putting out the "southern fire." However, the report is an attempt at least to focus the RTG on developing a comprehensive strategy to deal with the decades-old violence in far southern Thailand before it evolves into something worse. The recommendations as a whole deserve our continued public and private support and encouragement. We should continue support for the TAF schools project, and find ways to help the Thai improve, even if only incrementally, the administration of justice in the

South. The official government reaction to the NRC's report continues to be muted and acting Prime Minister Thaksin -- following his initial public statement of support -- has said little about the report in recent days. A National Security Council official told poloff that they had been ordered to "study" the report, but acknowledged that the government was not discussing implementation. The July visits to Washington of Thai Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart and Foreign Minister Kantathi offer opportunities to reinforce our June 21 statement of support for the NRC and the process of reconciliation while encouraging the Thai government to design and implement a comprehensive, long-term approach to the South. End Comment

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